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FM AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9184
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUCNSOM/SOMALIA COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEHAE/AMEMBASSY ASMARA IMMEDIATE 2286
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RHMFISS/CJTF HOA IMMEDIATE
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 000393

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF, AF/E, AND INR/AA
CJTF-HOA FOR POLAD
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA-WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/23/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [PBTS](#) [PHSA](#) [DJ](#) [ER](#) [XW](#)
SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI FM CONCERNED ABOUT APPARENT ERITREAN
NAVAL FACILITY UNDER CONSTRUCTION AT BAB AL MANDAB STRAIT

REF: A. DJIBOUTI 389
[1](#)B. DJIBOUTI 380 (NOTAL)
[1](#)C. DJIBOUTI 378 (NOTAL)

DJIBOUTI 00000393 001.6 OF 002

Classified By: ERIC WONG, CHARGE D'AFFAIRES A.I. REASON: 1.4 (B), (D)
AND (G).

[1](#)1. (S) SUMMARY. Djiboutian Foreign Minister Mahmoud Ali Yousseuf plans to travel to Asmara to protest Eritrea's ongoing construction of an apparent naval facility at Ras Doumeira, along the strategic Bab al Mandab strait. Imagery from the Djibouti President's April 22 visit to Ras Doumeira shows extensive trenches wrapping around the coastline, and thatched structures (not tents) inhabited by uniformed troops, presumably Eritrean. According to Yousseuf, Eritrean troops are "clearly" on Djiboutian territory; of greater concern, however, is that an Eritrean naval facility, no matter how nascent, poses a potential threat to international maritime traffic using the Bab al Mandab strait. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (S/NF) On April 23, Charge, GRPO, and Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa Country Coordination Element (CJTF-HOA CCE) CDR James Dickie met with Foreign Minister Mahmoud Ali Yousseuf, to follow up on the FM's April 22 visit to Ras Doumeira with President Guelleh. Per instructions and as authorized by Washington for release to Djibouti, Charge passed USG imagery of Ras Doumeira to the Foreign Minister.

ERITREAN TROOPS "CLEARLY ON DJIBOUTI'S SIDE" OF THE BORDER

[1](#)3. (S) FM Yousseuf presented the GODJ's own color photographs of Ras Doumeira (supplied by France), taken during the April 22 visit by helicopter. The photographs depict fortifications along the coastline, including significant trenches wrapping around Ras Doumeira; several dozen thatched structures being used by apparent troops in military uniforms (BDUs); heavy construction machinery (e.g., a back hoe); and several small patrol boats (twin outboard "vedette de type Conquest") armed with machine guns and at least one apparent crew-served weapon. According to FM Yousseuf, these Eritrean fortifications began two months previously.

[1](#)4. (S) While an 1882 agreement between a local sultan and the French called for all of Ras Doumeira to be Djiboutian territory, FM Yousseuf explained that the Eritrea-Djibouti

boundary intersected the "mountains" at Ras Doumeira: the north was Eritrean, while the south was Djiboutian. Some 70 percent of the mountain was Djiboutian territory, he said. Youssouf identified "tents" imaged on the southern side of Ras Doumeira as Eritrean, not Djiboutian; thus, Eritrean forces were "clearly on Djibouti's side of the border".

15. (S) In response, FM Youssouf said Djibouti had deployed troops with "heavy vehicles" at Ras Doumeira, and would seek to maintain reinforcements at its base at Moulhoule (approximately 15 km south of Ras Doumeira).

DJIBOUTIAN FM TO TRAVEL TO ASMARA

16. (S) Djiboutian government representatives had met on the morning of April 22 with two Eritrean colonels, Youssouf said, who had initially instructed Eritrean forces to withdraw from the border. However, later that evening, Eritrea had deployed additional troops in the area. Eritrea was thus "not very cooperative so far," Youssouf said, as it was "not reasonable" to maintain such a troop presence at the border. Youssouf said he planned to travel personally to Asmara on the evening of April 23, "to try to convince Isaias we are friends." Youssouf said he would propose the establishment of joint monitoring stations (at Ras Doumeira) as an initial confidence-building measure, manned by both Eritrean and Djiboutian authorities. In time, he said, such monitoring stations could transform into customs points.

TRENCHES AND COASTAL FORTIFICATIONS SUGGEST NAVAL FACILITY

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17. (S) FM Youssouf expressed deep concern that the coastal area at Ras Doumeira, where the bulk of Eritrean structures and troops appear to be located, was in fact an Eritrean naval facility under construction. Noting that the Bure-Assab plain was flat terrain, and that neither landlocked Ethiopia nor Djibouti (with 12 small boats) had a significant navy, Youssouf asserted that the Eritrean fortifications on the mountains of Ras Doumeira were intended to exercise Eritrean control over the strategic Bab al Mandab strait, which was extremely narrow (18 km). An Eritrean naval base at Ras Doumeira was "not good for Djibouti or the international community," Youssouf said. According to Youssouf, Djiboutian intelligence indicated that the facility was under the control of Eritrean Navy Commander, Major General Karikare Ahmed Mohammed. MG Karikare had been invited to participate in April 20 discussions with Djiboutian officials, but had declined to appear, Youssouf added.

18. (C) FM Youssouf said the GODJ had issued a public statement on Doumeira (featured in local state-run media), in order to quell public rumors that Djibouti had been invaded or that Eritrean and Djiboutian troops had engaged each other. However, he said Djibouti still preferred "silence at the international level," as diplomatic discussions continued. (NOTE: Today's state-run French-language "La Nation" newspaper featured a front-page lead article on Eritreans at Doumeira, under the headline "Unfriendly plots at the border," accompanied by a statement by Djibouti's foreign ministry that, inter alia, "political contacts would be pursued." International media, including "Le Monde" and Agence France-Presse (AFP) have subsequently reported on Eritrea's incursion into Djiboutian territory. END NOTE.)

19. (S) COMMENT. The Djiboutian Foreign Minister's interpretation of USG- and (likely) French-provided imagery indicates an Eritrean military presence well on the Djiboutian side of Ras Doumeira. Even if Eritrean forces were to withdraw to the Eritrean side of Ras Doumeira,

however, the fortifications and coastal trenches already completed suggest that Eritrea has established a de facto naval facility adjacent to the strategic Bab al Mandab strait. This poses a potential concern to international maritime traffic, including that of the U.S. Navy. While the GODJ has so far sought to minimize international attention to this incident, the public statement by Djibouti's MFA has led to growing international media coverage, which may influence the outcome of bilateral discussions between Eritrea and Djibouti. END COMMENT.
WONG